

Hearing Aid Compatibility Compliance for Traditional Telephone Equipment

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

The Hearing Aid Compatibility Act of 1988 (HAC Act) requires that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ensure that **all** telephones manufactured or imported for use in the United States after August 1989, and all “essential” telephones are hearing aid compatible. “Essential” phones are defined as “coin-operated telephones, telephones provided for emergency use, and other telephones frequently needed for use by persons using such hearing aids.” These might include workplace telephones, telephones in confined settings (like hospitals and nursing homes), and telephones in hotel and motel rooms. Secure telephones, as well as telephones used with public mobile and private radio services, are **exempt** from the HAC Act.

“Secure” phones are defined as “telephones that are approved by the U.S. Government for the transmission of classified or sensitive voice communications.”

A telephone that is hearing aid compatible has an internal feature that allows the use of telephone-compatible hearing aids. FCC rules require that phones subject to the HAC Act: (1) produce a magnetic field of sufficient strength and quality to permit coupling with hearing aids that contain telecoils; and (2) provide an adequate range of volume.

A telecoil is a small, tightly-wrapped piece of wire that, when activated, picks up the voice signal from the electromagnetic field that leaks from compatible telephones. Users of telecoil-equipped hearing aids are able to communicate effectively over the telephone without feedback and the amplification of unwanted background noise.

A volume control feature permits the user to adjust the level of sound emanating from the handset or headset receiver. It allows telephones to be effectively used by persons with hearing aids, and by other persons with a hearing impairment who do not use hearing aids.

Because it will benefit both the public and individuals with hearing disabilities and is technically and economically feasible, the FCC has limited the HAC Act’s exemption for wireless phones, or so-called “public” mobile services. Wireless phone manufacturers and wireless service carriers must provide digital wireless phones that are compatible with hearing aids within the next few years.

Although analog wireless phones do not usually cause interference with hearing aids or cochlear implants, digital wireless phones sometimes do because of electromagnetic energy emitted by the phone’s antenna, backlight, or other components.

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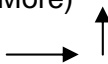
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Because digital wireless phones are technically superior and offer cheaper calling plans, they are vastly more popular than their analog counterparts. Access to them is essential to the safety and increased convenience that consumers demand. To combat this problem, the FCC has created a series of phased-in requirements that will greatly increase the number of digital wireless phones that are hearing aid-compatible.

Specifically, within two years, digital wireless phone manufacturers must make available to carriers two hearing aid-compatible, reduced-RF-emissions handsets for each air interface it offers. Also within two years, carriers must provide consumers with two hearing aid-compatible, reduced-RF-emissions handsets for each air interface it serves.

Nationwide carriers will probably have to provide more than two hearing aid-compliant handsets for each air interface because of the way the new rules are structured.

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Within three years, digital wireless phone manufacturers must produce, and carriers must offer, at least two hearing aid-compliant handset models with telecoil coupling. By 2008, one half of all digital phones will comply with the reduced RF emissions requirements.

In order to fully inform the consumer about hearing aid compliance, the new rules create labeling requirements for manufacturers and information disclosure requirements for carriers.

For more information about hearing aid compatibility and volume control, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb. Requests for written materials or alternate formats can be sent by mail to: The Federal Communications Commission, Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau, 445 12th Street, SW, Washington, DC 20554, or emailed to fccinfo@fcc.gov. Additionally, you can call the Commission's toll-free consumer information hotline, 1-888-225-5322 (voice), 1-888-835-5322 (TTY), to place your request by phone.

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